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Vacation Shots: Benjamin Reznik, partner at Jeffer Mangels Butler & Mitchell, in front of some of his travel photos at the law firm's headquarters in Century City.

Down to Earth

Benjamin Reznik covers a lot of ground as a land-use attorney at Jeffer Mangels and a frequent traveler to exotic locations.

By **HOWARD FINE** Staff Reporter

WHEREVER there's a big land-use dispute in Los Angeles, Benjamin Reznik is likely to be involved. Of course, he was a pioneer in the field, entering at the dawn of homeowner opposition to development and the rise of the slow-growth movement. With his wife, Janice, he built up his practice in Encino and became prominent in the San Fernando Valley business community as chairman of the Valley Industry and Commerce Association. Then he merged his practice with Jeffer Mangels Butler & Mitchell LLP and headed up the firm's land-use division. His cases have included some of the most hotly contested development battles in Los Angeles. Some recent examples: He represents a Saudi prince seeking to build a mansion near Benedict Canyon amid homeowner opposi-

Benjamin Reznik

TITLE: Partner

COMPANY: Jeffer Mangels Butler & Mitchell LLP

BORN: Haifa, Israel; 1951

EDUCATION: B.A., political science, UCLA; J.D., USC Gould School of Law.

CAREER TURNING POINTS: Taking the land-use case that led to his specialty; decision to fold his practice into Jeffer Mangels in 1997.

MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE: Bruce Jeffer, a founding partner of Jeffer Mangels; wife, Janice, who was co-owner of law practice for 15 years and founded Jewish World Watch.

PERSONAL: Lives in Encino with wife; couple has three grown children.

HOBBIES: Travel, golf.

tion, and Reznick is fighting Beverly Hills City Hall on behalf of a family trust trying to convert an office building to medical office space. Reznik, 60, is the son of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Israel after World War II and eventually settled in Los Angeles. His wife founded and runs Jewish World Watch, which is dedicated to helping genocide victims in Africa's Darfur region and rape victims in the Congo. The pair loves to travel to exotic locales, including on safari in Africa, and trips to Iceland and rural China. Reznik met with the Business Journal in his Century City office to chat about his most challenging cases, travels and wife's humanitarian causes.

Question: How did you decide to become a lawyer?

Answer: I had just married my wife, Janice, after finishing college and was looking at a career in

foreign relations. Then, one day, my father-in-law pulled me aside and said, "Son, I think you should get a profession." He was a very practical man and he encouraged me to get a law degree. Once I got to law school, it really grabbed me: You take everyday problems and try to help people get to solutions or a resolution.

How did you get involved in land-use law?

For the first few years after I opened my own practice on South Beverly Drive in Beverly Hills, I did a little bit of everything, including some land-use and transaction cases. I had also worked on the first campaign of Zev Yaroslavsky for Los Angeles City Council. Shortly after he got elected, a constituent came who needed a zone change for a dental office in the Porter Ranch area. The councilman's planning deputy told this doctor that he needed a land-use attorney and referred him to Latham & Watkins and to me. The guy couldn't afford Latham & Watkins, so he chose my practice.

Then what happened?

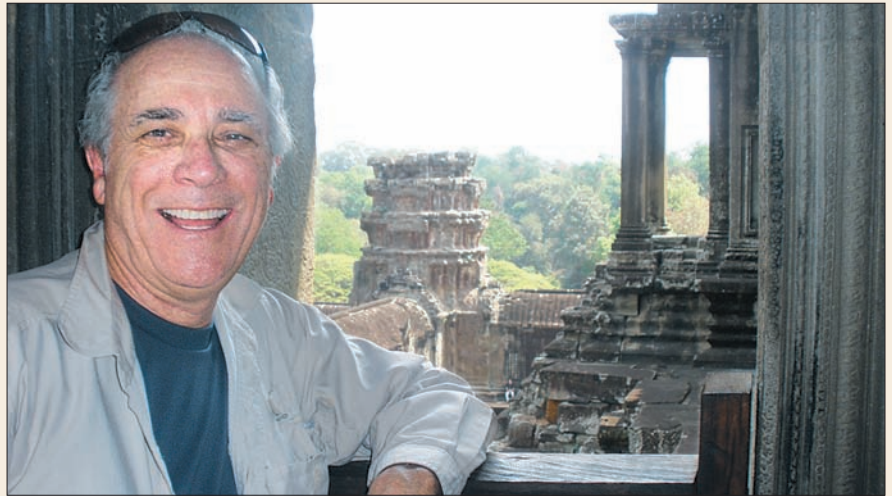
Since he needed a zone change, I told him to go talk to the neighboring landowners. Next thing you know, I get a call from one of those landowners, Shappell Industries – the folks who developed Porter Ranch – and they want to meet with me, too. They ended up hiring me to handle all their entitlement hearings. Now this was back in 1979 and there really were no land-use lawyers around. Up until that time, land-use cases were handled by architects and engineers.

Why was that?

Well, until that time, there really was no organized opposition to development. The homeowner movement didn't really get started until about 1980 and the slow-growth movement not until a couple years after that. So all that was involved was just processing paperwork, which could easily be done by architects and engineers.

So you were a pioneer of sorts?

Yes, it was exciting and I loved it. I was in the trenches with the landowners and developers and with the homeowner opponents. It really brought the law to life in a confluence of public policy, politics and constitutional rights. Even now, more than 30 years later, I still find it exciting.



In March: Reznik at the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia.



In 1992: With President Clinton while chairman of VICA.



In 2002: With wife Janice, second from left, and their kids on African safari.

What's been the most challenging case you've worked on?

That's a difficult question as there have been so many. It's easier for me to focus on recent cases. I'd have to say the one I'm working on now with the proposed mansion in Benedict Canyon. It's billionaires vs. billionaires on this project and there are some really big egos, so it's unlimited funding on each side. That makes it so hard to find a practical solution.

Any other challenging cases?

The Beverly Hills medical building. That's turning into a real exciting case. There's mounting evidence that the City Council hearing on the proposal to convert it into a medical office building was patently unfair, that the case was not decided on the merits. That's proving quite a challenge.

You and your wife developed quite a land-use law practice in the San Fernando Valley. Why did you decide to join Jeffer Mangels?

I was getting interviewed for the super large development projects and was being shortlisted, but not getting hired. I was being told that I didn't have the proper corporate size and resources. These were exciting cases that I really wanted to handle and they were going to the Latham & Watkins of the world. So I had to make a decision: stay with small and midsized cases in our own practice or swallow a loss of autonomy and go join a big firm.

You took quite a bit of heat for that decision.

At the time, the secession battle was heating up and I was the head of the Valley Industry and Commerce Association. All of a sudden, I was joining a law firm in Century City. The Los Angeles Times portrayed the move as my abandoning the Valley. Yet it turned out to be the right move for me. I started getting those larger cases.

On occasion, you have represented homeowner and community groups battling development proposals. How do you reconcile that with the bulk of your cases representing developers seeking to build projects?

I do not see myself as an ideologue in land-use law. My duty is to the client. If a client is a homeowner group that believes a project is out of scale with its surroundings or otherwise flawed and I review the case and come to a

similar conclusion, I have no problem representing that homeowner group.

Such as?

In the 1990s, I represented the Encino Homeowners Association that was fighting the erection of billboards going up to 65 feet in height when the city code clearly only allowed 45 feet in that area. That was wrong and I was comfortable representing the homeowners. People may see this as an inconsistency in my views, but that's because people tend to view land use as a black-and-white homeowner vs. developer issue.

What about your wife, who was such an integral part of your independent law practice?

My wife wanted to get back to her social activist roots and do work for non-profits. After she retired from Jeffer Mangels, she started from scratch Jewish World Watch, which has raised millions of dollars to help deal with the genocide in Darfur and the rapes of women in the Congo. They dig water wells and clean schools, and they've developed the world's largest solar-cooking program. They are now in multiple refugee camps in Chad dealing with refugees from Darfur.

Sounds like your wife has made multiple trips to the region. Have you gone along on any of these trips?

No, I couldn't. The trips are restricted because they are refugee camps under sponsorship of the United Nations and the spots on the small planes are limited to non-profit personnel. She's going back to the Congo this fall.

You must be concerned for her safety on these trips.

Of course. We stay in touch by phone every day. And she's told me all the stories about those trips and there have been some harrowing moments. But I'm immensely proud of what she's doing. Right now, she's working on legislation similar to the blood diamond legislation except that it's focused on the minerals that go into our cell phones and computers. They want to have a tracking system to know the mines that the minerals come out of do not use slave labor.

Should I throw out my cell phone then?

Well this would be for minerals mined in the

future. But as of right now, 95 percent of the minerals used in cell phones and computers – including tin and tungsten – come from the Congo region (where slave labor is rampant). So this legislation could have really far-reaching consequences.

You and your wife love to travel. What's the most exciting place you've been to?

I get very excited about seeing awesome beauty spots in the world, whether it's Africa, Alaska or Iceland. I'd have to say that for me, Iceland is the most exciting and beautiful place. You can see the world the way it was 10,000 years ago, with very little human presence. I keep photos of Iceland and the other beautiful places I've been to on my BlackBerry so I can look at them when I get too wrapped up in work.

What's on your list of places yet to see?

I have to say, when I recently picked up that book of 1,000 places to see before you die, I was amazed at how many of the places that I've been to. But the top destinations still on our list: Antarctica and Machu Picchu.

How do you manage to work in all this travel with your case load?

When my wife and I ran our own law firm, we really couldn't get away all that much. But since I joined Jeffer Mangels, I've been able to make more time to travel. There are more people that I can delegate the work to. Plus, now, all our children are grown, so that frees us up a little more.

You also like to play golf.

Yes. I can see the Hillcrest Country Club from my office window, constantly beckoning me.

What's your typical day like?

My schedule is somewhat unusual – though maybe not for an Angeleno. As I live in Encino and the office is in Century City, I work around traffic patterns. So I often work from home in the mornings, making conference calls as early as 7:30 a.m. Usually most days, I go to a city hall, whether it's Los Angeles or Beverly Hills or Santa Monica, for hearings on my cases. Those hearings are the central focus of my day. Then, in the late afternoons, I come back to Century City and am in meetings with clients or with colleagues at the firm.

What about your evenings?

Of course, on many evenings, I have meetings, either official public hearings on my clients' projects or meetings with various stakeholder groups – homeowners, neighborhood councils, etc.

Sounds pretty hectic.

Yes it is, and more so now than a few years ago. My staff in the land-use division is now down to 14 from 24 three years ago at the end of the real estate boom. So it's a bit more of a workload for all of us.

Your parents were Jewish World War II survivors. How did they escape the Holocaust?

They fled into Russia. My parents didn't know each other at the time, but they each separately ended up in Russia. My mother fled to Siberia and Tashkent and my father journeyed all over the country selling goods on the black market.

He was a commodity trader and very entrepreneurial. When the war ended, they ended up in the same displaced persons camp, where they met and got married. They immigrated to Israel shortly after this and that's where I was born.

So how did you end up in Los Angeles?

After living in Israel for 12 years, my father felt that the opportunities were better in the United States, so we all got on a ship in Haifa with \$40 in my father's pocket and came to the United States. We first went to my uncle's place in Rochester, N.Y., and lived there for a year. My mother had a cousin in Los Angeles, so, in 1962, we came to Los Angeles. Two years later, my father borrowed some money and bought a half-interest in a liquor store in South Los Angeles.

The Watts riots were just a year away. Did the store survive?

The store was at 64th and Vermont; when the riots

hit, the store was looted. But two days later, all his neighbors came out to help him clean up. I remember helping out and then going to work in the store. My father sold the store in 1970 and bought a board and care facility. He's the classic American immigrant success story.

What's the best piece of advice you've received?

That came from Bruce Jeffer: You have to have the discipline to manage the business aspect of a case, to deal honestly with the client on cost issues. In many law firms, attorneys take on cases and then don't say no to the client when the bills aren't being paid promptly. They are too wrapped up in the legal thicket to see this business side. We've seen some big law firms go under recently because they lacked the financial discipline. It's not something you get taught in law school.